

A LEADER

NOT A HERO

I LEFT THE JOINT AIR-TO-SURFACE STANDOFF MISSION (JASSM) AS A SYSTEMS ENGINEER TO START A NEW PROGRAM CALLED THE SMALL DIAMETER BOMB (SDB). I THOUGHT THAT THIS WOULD BE A GOOD OPPORTUNITY TO MAKE THE TRANSITION INTO PROGRAM MANAGEMENT.

BY LYNDA RUTLEDGE

THIS LITTLE WEAPON, THOUGH, WAS NOT JUST REPRESENTATIVE of a transition in my career. It was a paradigm shift for the Air Force. Traditionally, we've held the American outlook of "bigger is better." Look at our cars, our houses. So this program was symbolic of a culture shift. It was important to make a switch to smaller weapons, because the Cold War was over, and we were going into smaller areas. Collateral damage became a big issue, and we were limited in space on the aircrafts.

BUT CAN SMALLER GET FUNDED?

Being naïve, I thought, "We're going to start up a program. Somebody must want this. They'll give me money, we'll lay out the strategies, and we'll get started." I was frustrated when it didn't go that way. Somebody told me that it takes patience to be a Program Manager. I thought, "Well, I'll work on that."

While I was working to obtain funding to develop an acquisition strategy and to build coalitions, I was also trying to make people understand what we were doing. The weapons side of the house doesn't get a lot

of money thrown down to us compared to our aircrafts. So at first I had a very small team of only four people.

The four of us worked day in and day out coming up with acquisition strategies and working with our warfighter users to develop requirements. But every year we'd find out that we were just under the cut and that we wouldn't get funded. And every year I would think, "It's time for me to leave." But I kept going, kept trying to build it. After three years of trying to start this, I had laid out about 20 acquisition strategies in any flavor you wanted. I had all kinds of choices for anybody that came along.

THEN IT SNOWBALLED

It was Super Bowl weekend of 2000—not that I watch the Super Bowl, but my husband was watching it—and I was working on getting my numbers together. I had gotten a call that Friday afternoon saying that General Jumper, who at the time was the Commander of Air Combat Command, wanted to pursue development of this weapon. So they said, "We're going to fund it."

I was so excited. I went around briefing my strategy and got things going. But what happened was that when this program started, I was in my comfort zone. Then my span of control went haywire overnight. Over a period of two months, I went from managing four people to 30 people.

At this point, I had made every decision about the program along the way. It was my vision, my baby, my masterpiece. I knew everything about this system. And I liked it that way. I loved being able to make every decision and to tell everyone what they needed to do to make my vision a reality. When I went into the teams, everybody knew how I operated: I tell you what to do, and you go do it.

Then I was sitting around the table one day in a meeting trying to get our Request For Proposal (RFP) together. What I found is I had driven these people to expect me to make every decision. All of a sudden, I got overwhelmed. I had about 25 people around the table, and I'm saying, "We need to have these factors developed. I need you to write your section L, you to write your section M, you to write your instructions for the offer, and then bring it all back to me." They all looked at me and said, "How do you want me to do that?"

I thought, "I'm in over my head. There is no way that I'm going to be able to do every one of these people's jobs, or tell them exactly what to do, or check all of their work." I just left the meeting.

RELEASING THE GRIP

There was a retired Colonel who worked for me as a support contractor. I used him as a sounding board a lot. I sat down at his desk and said, "Bill, I'm in trouble. All of these people expect me to make every single decision and tell them exactly how to do everything. I'm not going to have time to do it anymore." He said, "You've got to let go of this. You have no choice. Otherwise, you are not going to make it."

It was extremely hard for me, because I felt such ownership of the program. I felt like I was giving up my firstborn when I gave it to these people to try to implement. But I called everybody back in the next day.

They were waiting for me to give them instructions on exactly how to write up their RFP. I said, "Here's the deal. I'm not going to think for you anymore. We've got to get on contract in six months." I said, "If you've never done it before, you're going to learn now. I'm not telling you how to do it. You had better figure it out. I'll be happy to help you, but I can't do it all."

I was very nervous though. Here I was not tracking everything day to day. I wasn't right on top of it writing it myself. But by the end of the source selection, surprisingly enough, things had changed. Some of the people that wouldn't go to the bathroom without asking permission were up at the front of the room, coming up with their own methodologies, leading the pack, and making decisions. All of a sudden, they had emerged as leaders.

A NEW UNDERSTANDING

At that point, I was more proud of having let go than of doing it all myself. My focus had changed from the details, the implementation

of developing every one of these criteria, and dealing with the contractors, to leading the people.

When I realized that I had to do that, things got easier. You would think that it was an obvious thing, but sometimes you have to learn the hard way. Heroes are people that can come in, take over, and do it all themselves. But when you lead people, you don't have to do it yourself. You're leading them to the vision.

I don't know that I necessarily ever would have gotten slapped in the face like I did had I just been on a normal program. After having gone from four people to 30 people in a two-month time frame—and having them staring me in the face, wanting to know everything to do—the light came on. No matter how good you are, this isn't a one-man show. There are no heroes in this. •



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